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ANALYSIS BRANCH

FROM : Amembassy LONDON

DATE: July 17, 1969

SUBJECT : Leonard Beaton on the W.S. ABM Debate

REF :

We enclose an article by the Times' Leonard Beaton, which sets forth the thesis that opposition to the Safeguard system in the US, which Beaton describes as "especially virulent", arises from a deep psychological preference among Americans for the offensive, and a deep resistance to the defensive.

Beaton approves the basic decision to move ahead with missile defense technology, but thinks the real peril, and the threat to stability, is the MIRV, against which he sententiously exhorts the "forces of light" in the U.S. Senate to direct their fire.

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Dangers of a new warhead



The bitter opposition to the Johnson and now Nixon proposals for ballistic-missile defences in the United States demands explanation. A Congress which has supported every major Administration measure for American nuclear superiority for a quarter of a century (at times voting more money than it was asked for) has turned decidedly sceptical.

Some of the reasons are obvious. The Democratic left is running free again after eight years of involvement with the establishment. A disastrous and ugly war has left the military seriously discredited. Huge sums of money are involved and yet the proponents are unable to offer any promise of certain success, even over the long term. Indeed, the opponents are able to argue that missile defences could actually make the United States less secure by provoking a great increase in forces on both sides.

Obviously on this basis there was bound to be opposition—as there was opposition to the hydrogen bomb and to the large-scale missile programmes of the early 1960s. But the present opposition is especially virulent. Some instinct is drawing back from missile defences. Looking at the behaviour of the American political animal on these questions in the past, there is one obvious parallel. It occurred in the early years of the Kennedy Administration when a branch of the strategic community had been saying that what was urgently needed was a massive fall-out shelter programme. The formidable Mr. Robert McNamara took up this theme when he reached office. He concluded that when it came to saving American lives, one of the best investments of national resources would be in shelters.

These proposals rapidly came to nothing, or virtually nothing, because any mention of shelters aroused quite unforeseen political hostility. The theoretical arguments were remorselessly put forward by Dr. Herman Kahn, in particular, in books which far outsold anything else produced by the strategic community. Yet neither the Congress nor the public was remotely interested in shelters.

A simple explanation suggests itself. The American people are prepared to arm themselves to the teeth to deter nuclear war or even to win it. But when a proposal comes which assumes that they are themselves under nuclear attack they will have nothing of it. Agreeing to shelters involved psychologically crawling into the ground and huddling under an enemy blow. This was simply unacceptable. So too with ballistic missile defences. They can only be imagined in the context of a mighty enemy attack. Americans have a deep resistance to the defensive—that is the simple explanation of why they have come to grief in Vietnam—and it seems to show itself in the nuclear confrontation as well as in lesser situations.

If this is the underlying explanation, any victory which the anti-A.B.M. party may win in the Senate will almost certainly prove to be hollow. Fundamentally, the whole missile defence technology is still experimental. Whether the United States buys the present generation of radars and sets up a few defensive missiles, or whether, on the other hand, she waits a few years, what is created will be ineffective and partial.

But what is coming up soon and would be a serious threat to the present stability in Russian-American affairs is the decision about multiplying the numbers of weapons in each American warhead. Without building any new launchers, there is a real possibility that under the name of M.I.R.V. (the multiple independently-targeted reentry vehicle) a great expansion in American nuclear striking forces will be achieved. This is a much more serious threat to the present order than A.B.M.s. But it is offensive and not defensive: the opposition to it has not been nearly as successful as the opposition to ballistic missile defences.

In the Soviet Union we have the opposite phenomenon. All the evidence of past Russian decisions suggests that they are very much more ready to spend money on defensive forces than offensive forces. The Americans have been consistently surprised at the numbers of offensive weapons they have acquired, in each case it has fallen short of predictions. This has not been the result of conservative intelligence methods. It

cause western forecasts have been consistently modest about Russian defensive forces. At present, western intelligence is showing great surprise at the implications of a vast new anti-bomber defensive network which is being spread across the Soviet Union. There is no reason to doubt that this is the first element in a total defensive system which it is hoped will give the minimum casualties from western bomber and missile attack, whether retaliatory or other.

In these circumstances, which way should the Americans move? The first thing to be said is that it is always possible that defences will become superior to the offensive and that in these circumstances the Americans must be able to construct an effective defence. (It is time someone in Europe gave some serious thought to this long term possibility.) The second is that a great new programme for weapons whose effects are extremely uncertain is an undesirable prospect. The present A.B.M. decision is not yet either of these. It is essentially a decision about the kind of development programme the United States wants to pursue for an unknown future. To the extent that the Russians may seem in the coming years to be acquiring some capacity to wipe out American missiles on the ground it would certainly be much better to build defences than to build hundreds more launchers. It is therefore desirable that the Americans should be moving ahead in missile defence technology. President Nixon's modest programme is not a bad compromise, though he has been making some dubious claims about offering a light defence to the whole country.

The real peril is the unchecked move towards multiple warheads and the massive rise in number of American weapons this implies. In fighting the battle of the A.B.M. Senator Kennedy and his friends are fighting on politically favourable ground. Popular fears are with them. But if they want to show themselves to be partisans of a safer and wiser defence policy, they should arouse their fellow Senators to the perils of M.I.R.V.s. That is the real battle for the forces of light.